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ABSTRACT

This occasional paper excerpts student reaction to the social studies simulation "Economic Systems," developed by Academic Games Associates. Introductory remarks by the series editor emphasize the importance of a debriefing session to allow the relationship of simulation and learning objectives to be assimilated. In this case study, the game is used as a tool to reinforce economic concepts studies taught previously through reading assignments from "American Capitalism" by Laurence Leamer and Dorothy Thompson. The beginning level of the game, "Production, and Consumption," includes the three economic roles of worker, farmer, and manufacturer, for which the students divide into three, eight man groups and play for three class periods. The excerpted reactions, part of a fourth class period devoted to debriefing, cover the purpose of the games, what was learned, problems encountered, and recommendations for future use. The teacher feels that the game makes concepts concrete, fulfilling his objectives to develop an understanding of supply and demand, price determination, the interrelationship of different roles in society, and the effect of collective action. (JH)

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STUDENT REACTIONS TO SOCIAL STUDIES SIMULATIONS: A CASE STUDY

by

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PREFACE

Simulations tend to share several characteristics: they are based upon some sort of a model of the "real world" (e.g. a social or economic system), roles of participants are described; the behaviors of the participants are structured (ranging from very rigid to very flexible) in relationship to the description of the roles; there is a stated goal to be achieved or problem to be resolved.

In recent years there has been a dramatic increase in the number and variety of different types of simulation games made available commercially, There has been a parallel increase in the use of simulation as an instructional strategy in social studies classes.

Hebert Meserve, the author of this Occasional Paper, describes the use of one such social studies simulation, Economic Systems, developed by Academic Games Associates (which originated at the Johns Hopkins University and has been under the direction of Dr. James S. Coleman). Mr. Meserve provides a brief description of Economic Systems, and the setting in which the simulation was used.

A critical part of the use of simulations in an instructional setting is the "debriefing" session, in which the participants discuss their reactions to and reflections upon the experience of participating in the simulation. Some teachers, possibly somewhat apprehensive about whether they will be able to sustain the high level of student motivation and involvement in the simulation, tend to minimize or even eliminate the debriefing stage. However, these debriefing sessions help the participants clarify the nature and extent of what can be learned from the simulation.

This paper focuses on the debriefing phase of the simulation and provides the reader with a "representative sample" of student responses to the following questions:

1. What did you see as the purpose of the game [i.e. simulation]?
2. What did you learn from playing the game [simulation]?
3. What problems did you encounter in the game [simulation]?
4. Do you think future American History students should play the game [simulation]?

If simulations are to be something more than merely motivational devices, then teachers and students may well wish to give special attention to the role of the debriefing session and its relationship to the simulation experience and the learning process.

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E. Seifman
(Series Editor)

Student Reactions to Social Studies Simulations: A Case Study

Student Reactions to the "Economic Systems" simulation game is the subject of this paper. The participating students were eleventh graders in an American History class at Earl L. Vandermeulen High School located in Port Jefferson, New York. Vandermeulen is a feeder school for four other districts that are just reaching sufficient size to build their own schools. As a result, the students of the five communities are from a broad spectrum of the middle class. Vandermeulen is a high school consisting of approximately 1,300 in pupil population. The community is one of the more established areas on the north shore of Long Island. When the high school was built in 1935 it served eleven different communities. As suburban growth has steadily moved east from New York City, the number of sending-districts has been reduced so that by 1975 there will be only one district sending its students to the high school. As a result of the growth and change in the area, the students come to Vandermeulen with a wide variety of educational experiences and academic competence. The students are heterogeneously grouped in all the social studies classes.

The students involved in the "Economic Systems" simulation game had a reading comprehension range from approximately eighth grade to post high school. Sixty per cent of the class showed interest in continuing their education at the college level. The knowledge of basic economic concepts was minimal for most of the students. In order to help the students obtain a better understanding of economics and how it affects their daily life, "Economic Systems" was used as a teaching technique. "Economic Systems" is a product of Academic Games Associates and is produced by Western Publishing Co. at a cost of $25.00 per kit. Reproduced below is a statement of the overview of the game as it appears in the instruction manuel.

" Economic System simulates, in abstract form, basic features common to a wide variety of economic system. Each player takes one of three economic roles:

worker, farmer, or manufacturer. Farmers and manufacturers control the farms and factories; workers supply labor to run the factories or provide additional labor for farms. Each player attempts to achieve a high level of satisfaction by obtaining and consuming two types of consumption goods.

The game is played in rounds, and each round consists of three stages-production, marketing, and consumption-during which food and manufactured goods are produced, exchanged, and consumed. Goods are exchanged and labor hired by the use of money, which takes on whatever value the players give it through their transactions. Players earn "points" by consuming food and manufactured goods. The point schedule reflects the principle of diminisking marginal utility: the idea that a commodity is more important if one has less of it.

Higher levels of the game provide for investment and the creation of capital and for a fourth role, the mine owner, whose mine produces the raw materials necessary to produce manufactured goods. Additional variations allow for trade between systems, taxation, consumption of public goods, (schools, roads, and police protection) and possible government regulation of the economy."

Only level one, "Production and Consumption", the most basic of the levels was played by the class which was divided into three groups of eight players with one scorekeeper per group. Three class periods were devoted to playing the game, a portion of another class was devoted to instructing the students in the rules of the game and another full class period was required for the "debriefing". Prior to playing the simulation game, the students had been introduced to basic concepts of economics such as supply and demand, and the value of money and economic cycles, the same concepts that would be used in playing level one in the game. The students were introduced to these concepts by reading assignments from American Capitalism by Laurence Learner and Dorothy Thompson. This book is published by the Council for Advancement of Secondary

Education and is available from the McGraw-Hill Publishing Company. The readings were supplimented by class discussion and teacher lectures. Only after the students had a foundation in basic economic concepts was "Economic Systems" introduced to the class. It was used primarily as a tool of reenforcement and most importantly for application of what had been learned.

As part of the students' debriefing, they were asked to write an evaluation of the simulation game. They were asked to comment on the following questions:

1. What did you see as the purpose of the game?
2. What did you learn from playing the game?
3. What problems did you encounter in the game?
4. Do you think future American History students should play the game?

The following is a representative sampling of the students' responses. For purpose of authenticity, the student evaluations are reproduced as they were originally handed in-without corrections.

STEVE

(1)The purpose was to show how an economy works. It's just fine to know that the flow of goods and services is in one direction, and the money flow is in the other, but to practice by experience helps make the knowledge more concrete.

(2)The main problem in the game was to try to get the most out of what you were selling, whether it be labor, hours, or food. Another problem was the fact of doing without a certain thing, such as food or manufactured goods, if the supply was limited or too high priced.

BARBARA

The purpose of the game was to show the stages of an economy, the production, marketing and consumption. The problems we were faced with were those like, to keep from going bankrupt, budgeting your resources so you get the most out of them, and knowing the stages of production so you know exactly what to get.

JOYCE

This game was very beneficial in that it showed pros and cons of competition. The major problem was that we didn't have enough manufacturers. The two manufacturers would fix their prices and rarely negotiate so we mainly gained points on only farm products. It isn't always good to keep your prices fixed because, as we learned, you do without. The game was very enjoyable and I would be happy to play it again.

BOB

I think that the purpose of the game was to try and get familiar of how our economy works. Not only being concerned with how it works, but also with the problems that may come up. The only problem which I thought had any importance was the forming of a monopoly, in group one.

CINDY

(3) The main point of the game is to show that everyone depends on the next person to sustain a living.

(4) I probably would play the game again because the things which happened are the same which happens in real businesses.

KIM

The purpose of the game was to show how prices change. Why they go up and down. It also showed how some monpoly are started.

From this game I understood alot more about marketing, production, and consumtion. I also learn you have to be a good barginer. You have to know who you can make the best bargins with.

DORRIE

Without production you can't have markting or consumtion. If you have one you need the others. And you need the workers, farmers and the manufatures to make this all possible. I think these games are worth while. Its easyer to understand the operations.

JOE

Alot was learned from this game. By assuming a position in an economic system, we were faced with the dilemnas of an average consumer. I learned how the economic cycle revolves.

I would do it again. It was a learning experience, and a welcome break from classroom doldrums and dull textbook learning.

CINDI

In our group we decided to have a boycott against the manufactorer, everyone agreed but one of the members that aproved of a boycott took the advantage that the manufactorer would deal only with him and just dropped out of the boycott which caused us to lose some of our gains. If this happens in just a game, you can imagine what happens in "real life".

One of our biggest problems was establishing prices. Some people were easy to deal with while others set high prices. As soon as there was an abundance of a product the price went down and sometimes the demand for it. We found it wasn't as easy as just going out and sailing.

Games like these make things alot easier to understand. Economics which is usually hard to understand and slow moving became alot of fun to get into with the game.

From the teacher's point of view, the objectives of the game were the development of an understanding of the following concepts:

1. The operation of supply and demand
2. How price is determined
3. The interrelationship of different roles in our society
4. The effect of collective action (unions or monopolies) on the economy

For these purposes the game was a success. The objectives were obtained, and the students have a better understanding of each concept because they have

been able to take abstract ideas and apply them in a concrete situation. As a result, one of the more difficult units in the American History syllabus has become an enjoyable learning and teaching experience.